



U.S. EMBASSY – BAGHDAD
Transcript



AMBASSADOR CHRISTOPHER HILL
INTERVIEW WITH MSNBC

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VOICE OF VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN: (In progress) ...drawn down a significant portion at 95,000. Already, hundreds of tons of equipments has already left Iraq. So it's not like on August we go, "Boom, we've now gone down from 145,000 down to 50,000." It's well, well underway, and it's working—

SPEAKER (Savannah Guthrie): That was Vice President Biden speaking exclusively to our own Andrea Mitchell in Baghdad over the weekend. As you heard, the plan to pull U.S. combat forces out by September is moving ahead, despite the Iraqis' stalemate over forming a government.

QUESTION (Chuck Todd): Christopher Hill is the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, and he joins us live from Baghdad.

And, Ambassador, I've got to start with what is going on with this formation of the government. I think part of the reason why the Vice President went out there was to meet with – I don't want to call them warring factions, they're not, that's an improper term – but competing factions, in trying to get this government together. It is now July, which, you had said in a briefing at the White House to a bunch of us, was your drop dead deadline. So how close are we?

AMBASSADOR HILL: First of all, it's 120 degrees here, so I'm not sure what your problem is back there.

(Laughter.)

AMBASSADOR HILL: But with regard to government formation, what we have are some coalitions who came in very close in the elections, and there is a lot of politics going on. Now, there are a lot of discussions about who is going to be the prime minister. Prime Minister Maliki wants to stay. He's got 89 seats. Mr. Allawi, who is the leader of the opposition, they have 91. You need 163 for a majority, so they are reaching out to the other coalitions. So I think we have to stay tuned a little.

And I can't tell you when it's going to end, but it is continuing, and the pace has really quickened in recent days. And I think having the Vice President here was a further impetus to sort of get this thing moving.

QUESTION (Guthrie): Well, Ambassador, that brings me to my question. What was the Vice President's message to these two politicians? I mean, obviously, you can't take a position about how the government should be shared, but how did he nudge them?

AMBASSADOR HILL: Well, first of all, the Vice President has been here some 17 times, 4 times since he's been Vice President. He is very, very well-known here. I mean, these people are on a first-name basis, practically. So they know him very well. And his message is the same message we've all had, which is we want a really good relationship with Iraq. We want a long-term relationship with Iraq, one based on a number of things: economics, culture, other things. But, you know, we are going to need to have an Iraqi government to deal with.

So, as he made very clear – he wasn't telling them how to do it, he wasn't telling them who to do it with – but he certainly was making the point that we have made, which is they've got to get on with this process.

QUESTION (Todd): Ambassador, you're about to leave this post and get out of foreign service. You're, I know, going to take over – I think it's University of Denver – be a dean for them. What does Middle East peace – today President Obama has a face-to-face with Prime Minister Netanyahu. We have heard before people make the case that Mideast peace can affect what's going on in Iraq, can matter what's going on in Iran, can matter what's going on even in other parts of the Middle East.

Make that case.

What does the Middle East peace process getting on track again mean for what's going on in Iraq?

AMBASSADOR HILL: Well, let me just say in Iraq – Iraq is surrounded by some tough situations. I mean, certainly having Iran as a neighbor is not easy for Iraq. And Iran has some big interests in Lebanon and elsewhere, which certainly don't make the situation easier here.

So, what really needs to happen in the whole region – but also in Iraq, in particular – it's got to calm down. People need to really go over to a political message. People need to get away from the kind of sort of brinkmanship and going to violence that too often has happened in this region, especially in this country.

So, what Iraq is doing is really something quite interesting. They have a multi-party, multi-coalition democracy right now. And they are really taking it out for a test run. It's not easy. But if they get through this, I think some of the other countries can look to this

situation and see that, even in Iraq, a country that, to put it mildly, doesn't have a long history with democracy, and if they can see it happening in Iraq, I think it can happen elsewhere.

QUESTION (Guthrie): All right. Ambassador Chris Hill, live from Baghdad, where he reports it's 120 degrees on the ground. But it's a dry heat, right, Ambassador?

AMBASSADOR HILL: Oh, it's a very dry heat, you're quite right about that.

QUESTION (Guthrie): Yes, yes, okay. Thank you so much, though. We appreciate your time.

AMBASSADOR HILL: Thank you.

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